Fall 2015


Kevin Lang Ringelstein

Old Dominion University

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RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION IN NORFOLK, VIRGINIA:
HOW THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT REINFORCED RACIAL DIVISION IN A
SOUTHERN CITY, 1914 – 1959

by

Kevin Lang Ringelstein
B.S. May 2007, United States Naval Academy

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
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MASTER OF ARTS

HISTORY

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Approved by:
John Weber (Director)
Brett Bebber (Member)
Elizabeth Zanoni (Member)
ABSTRACT

RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION IN NORFOLK, VIRGINIA: HOW THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT REINFORCED RACIAL DIVISION IN A SOUTHERN CITY, 1914 - 1959

Kevin Lang Ringelstein
Old Dominion University, 2015
Director: Dr. John Weber

This thesis examines how Norfolk, Virginia maintained residential segregation between the years 1914, when the city passed its first segregation ordinance, and 1959, when it received the All-America City Award for its massive slum clearance projects. By focusing on federal government initiatives in Norfolk, it shows that Norfolk’s leaders used the federal government’s assistance to map, analyze, and remove the city’s African American slums. Ultimately, it highlights the central role the federal government played in perpetuating residential segregation in Norfolk and how it opened a space for Norfolk’s leaders to act on their prejudice.

This thesis demonstrates that in the 1910s and 1920s, Norfolk’s leaders used residential segregation ordinances, restrictive covenants, and white terror to divide the city by race. Then in the 1930s and 1940s, federal government initiatives, such as “redlining” and segregating defense housing projects, validated Norfolk’s discriminatory housing practices and emboldened Norfolk’s leaders to continue to segregate the city. Finally, it shows that in the 1950s, the federal government funded projects in Norfolk that cleared African American slums, demolished mixed-race neighborhoods, and created buffer zones that preserved residential and school segregation.

Notable sources include the Lawrence M. Cox personal papers at Old Dominion University, historical surveys and maps from Charles K. Agle’s analysis of Norfolk in 1949, a 1940 map of Norfolk’s neighborhoods by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC), and numerous newspaper articles from the Norfolk Journal and Guide, Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch, and
the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*. Results of this research demonstrate that the federal government played a significant role in segregating Norfolk’s neighborhoods and helped create the racially homogenous neighborhoods that exist in Norfolk today.
Dedicated to the courageous men and women in Norfolk’s past and present who have challenged and crossed racial divides in the city.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who helped make this thesis a reality. First and foremost, I wish to thank Dr. John Weber of Old Dominion University for his mentorship. The idea of writing on residential segregation in Norfolk came from a discussion in his Civil Rights class, and he encouraged me to write on it from the moment I pitched the idea to him. I am sincerely grateful to Dr. Weber for reading through multiple drafts, listening to my ideas, and guiding me along throughout the entire thesis process. I would also like to thank Dr. Bebber and Dr. Zanoni of Old Dominion University. I am very appreciative of the time they took to help me identify the majors themes of my thesis and point me to a number of helpful sources and points-of-contacts. I wish to thank Troy Valos from Slover Public Library in Norfolk for introducing me to the first segregation ordinance in Norfolk, dedicating hours to helping me digitize historical maps, and showing me how to access historical newspapers through microfilm.

The inspiration to write on this topic came from my family. My parents, Todd and Sandra Ringelstein, raised my three brothers and I with the belief that we can be agents of change. Watching them humbly serve others and create a home where people and ideas flowed freely has influenced me in a profound way. I am very grateful for their constant love and encouragement to write this thesis. I would also like to thank my three brothers for their inspiration. Thanks to my oldest brother, Danny Ringelstein, for showing me at an early age the courage it takes to stand up for others in need. Thanks to my older brother, Austin Ringelstein, for listening to my ideas and encouraging me to speak up for marginalized groups. Thanks to my younger brother, Zak Ringelstein, for taking the time to read through my work, providing insightful feedback, and inspiring me daily with his passion to serve others. Most importantly, I am truly grateful to my
wife, Kate, and daughter, Adelaide. The patience and love they provided me throughout this process has been unwavering and has allowed me to complete this thesis. I thank them for their incredible support and belief that I had a story to tell.
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<thead>
<tr>
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<td>CORE</td>
<td>Committee on Racial Equality</td>
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<td>CSC</td>
<td>Citizens Slum Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>FHA</td>
<td>Federal Housing Administration</td>
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<td>FPHA</td>
<td>Federal Public Housing Authority</td>
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<td>HOLC</td>
<td>Home Owners’ Loan Corporation</td>
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<td>HUD</td>
<td>Housing and Urban Development</td>
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<td>NAACP</td>
<td>National Association for the Advancement of Colored People</td>
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<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<td>NBN</td>
<td>Neighbors Building Neighborhoods</td>
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<td>NEST</td>
<td>Norfolk Emergency Shelter Team</td>
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<td>NRHA</td>
<td>Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority</td>
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<td>United States Housing Authority</td>
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I am a Naval officer from a small town in rural New Hampshire. I went to a predominantly all-white high school and then attended the U.S. Naval Academy, which had a disproportionate amount of white college males than any other demographic group. Upon graduation, I attended Naval flight training, which similar to the U.S. Naval Academy, was virtually an all-white male fraternity. After being stationed for a short period of time at military installations across the southern United States, I finally received extended orders to Norfolk, Virginia. Since Norfolk is home to the largest Naval installation in the world and a major North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) command post, I knew I would work with people who hailed from all over the world and live among a diverse community.

As I prepared my move, I asked fellow Naval officers who had lived or currently lived in Norfolk on where to rent a home. After receiving numerous opinions, I began to notice a trend. Comments, such as “don’t live there, that place is ghetto,” “Live in this part of town, you’ll be well clear of the slums,” and “don’t drive through that neighborhood on your way to work, you might be shot,” were repeated over and over again, and I took them seriously. Of course I wanted to live in a safe neighborhood and live close to friends, but after I moved to Norfolk it did not take long for me to realize that areas known as “ghetto,” “slum,” and places where one might “be shot,” were the African American neighborhoods in town.

I was wrong in assuming I would live in a diverse community. Norfolk’s neighborhoods remain divided by race. In the neighborhood I moved to known as Ghent, there are literally train

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tracks that divide the wealthier white neighborhoods, which are closer to the water and downtown shops, from the African American neighborhoods that are more inland and crowded with lower-income housing. There are certainly exceptions to this divide, but the vast majority of residents on each side of the tracks are of one race. Furthermore, Norfolk’s homeless population is predominantly of one race. Anyone who volunteers with the Norfolk Emergency Shelter Team (NEST), which is a program that feeds and houses the homeless during the winter months, will note that almost all of the homeless seeking a meal and shelter are African American. The following thesis seeks to explain “why?” Why would military leaders who hail from all over the country caution each other from moving into African American neighborhoods? Why does a patchwork of racially homogeneous neighborhoods still exist in Norfolk?

The historiography of race relations in Norfolk is extensive. However, authors writing on this subject have primarily focused on the school desegregation crisis, the Norfolk 17, and the “massive resistance” movement between the 1950s and 1980s. The most recent and notable books include *Elusive Equality: Desegregation and Resegregation In Norfolk’s Public Schools* by Jeffrey Littlejohn and Charles Ford, *Pride and Prejudice: School Desegregation and Urban Renewal in Norfolk, 1950-1959* by Forrest White, and *Norfolk: The First Four Centuries* by Thomas Parramore, Peter Stewart, and Tommy Bogger. Recent works have examined and documented an important part of the long and complex history of race relations in Norfolk and have provided crucial insight into the Civil Rights Movement in Norfolk.\(^2\) In another notable work, author Earl Lewis contributed significantly to the historiography of race relations in Norfolk.

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Norfolk with his book *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia*, which provides a social and urban history of Norfolk’s African American community during the first half of the twentieth century.\(^3\)

Previous scholars, however, have not sufficiently examined the central role that residential segregation played in shaping race relations in Norfolk. Rather, residential segregation has been treated as a supplemental factor to other major developments, such as school desegregation. Lewis analyzed residential segregation as a roadblock to African American agency, but ended his analysis with World War II. White explored how city leaders perpetuated residential segregation through urban renewal projects, but mainly between 1950 and 1959.

Finally, Littlejohn and Ford assessed the role that residential segregation played in the school desegregation struggle, but primarily between 1960 and 1990. I hope to add to the historiography of race relations in Norfolk by analyzing residential segregation between the years 1914, when Norfolk passed its first segregation ordinance, and 1959, when the city received the All-America City Award for its massive slum clearance projects. While I trace developments that maintained residential segregation in Norfolk throughout these years, I pay particular attention to events in the 1930s and 1940s and the role the federal government played in preserving residential segregation in Norfolk. By placing residential segregation at the center of the white and African American divide, I hope to demonstrate how the federal government’s influence on residential segregation enabled Norfolk’s leaders to act on their prejudices and laid the foundation for the mammoth urban renewal projects in the 1950s and 1960s.

This thesis is not written out of disdain for anyone or judgment of those in the past, but rather as a hope for the future. As historian Karl Jacoby said in documenting difficult history:

“For without first recognizing our shared capacity for inhumanity, how can we at last begin to tell stories of our mutual humanity?”

Ultimately, I hope my thesis will provide a new perspective and insight to the history of race relations in Norfolk, help answer why Norfolk remains segregated today, and encourage Norfolk’s citizens to take part in a real discussion about the injustices of the past and the ways to bridge divides in the city today.

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CHAPTER II

INTRODUCTION: “NORFOLK IS NOT AN ‘ALL-AMERICA’ CITY”

On March 3rd, 1960, Joseph A. Jordan Jr, an African American attorney and disabled war
veteran, sat in his wheelchair in front of Norfolk, Virginia’s City Arena and held a sign that read,
“Discrimination and Segregation are not All-American.”1 Marching next to Jordan and amidst a
“heavy contingent of police,” other African American demonstrators and members of Norfolk’s
Committee on Racial Equality (CORE) quietly held similar protest signs, which read “All
American City-White Only,” “All American City Discriminates,” “All American City?” and “All
American Segregated City.”2 Inside the City Arena, which was adorned with patriotic
decorations, the U.S. Navy Commander-In-Chief Atlantic Fleet band played for approximately
1,230 of Norfolk’s white citizens as the demonstrators braved the “frigid weather” outside.3 In
recognition of Norfolk’s “mammoth slum-clearance program,” which leveled and displaced
predominantly African American neighborhoods, Look Magazine and the National Municipal
League awarded the city of Norfolk the 1959 All-America City Award.4

In the 1910s and 1920s, Norfolk’s leaders used residential segregation ordinances,
restrictive covenants, and white terror to divide the city by race, forcing Norfolk’s African
Americans into the “worst parts” of the city.5 Over time, every single African American

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4 Carter, “All-America City,” Virginian-Pilot, March 4, 1960. See also, “National Civic League: Helping
Norfolk, along with 10 other cities, received the 1959 All-America City Award. The National Civic League, known
as the National Municipal League when Norfolk received the award, is a non-profit organization that recognizes
American cities with the award each year for “outstanding civic accomplishments.” (http://www.nationalcivicleague.org) In 1959, they partnered with Look Magazine in presenting the award to Norfolk.
5 Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness (New York: The
neighborhood in Norfolk turned into a blighted area because of discriminatory housing practices. In the 1930s and 1940s, the federal government opened a space for Norfolk’s leaders to act on their prejudices and lawfully maintain and perpetuate residential segregation. Through various initiatives, the federal government helped Norfolk’s leaders map, analyze, and remove the city’s African American slums. Furthermore, Norfolk’s military presence and proximity to Washington D.C. gave the city a distinct advantage when bidding for federal funding. Norfolk, along with Galveston, Texas, received the very first funds from President Harry Truman’s Housing Act of 1949 for urban renewal projects. Norfolk’s leaders used this funding to clear the city’s African American slums and replace them with public housing throughout the 1950s. In the name of urban renewal, the federally-backed slum removal projects displaced Norfolk’s African Americans and perpetuated residential segregation by relegating Norfolk’s African Americans to the same “worst parts” of the city. In return for their initiatives, Norfolk, along with 11 other cities, received the All-America City Award.

When Norfolk’s African American community heard that Norfolk received the national award, they expressed their disapproval in an official protest letter. African American leaders wrote that Norfolk’s "negro citizens shared the pride felt by all its other citizens." However, when they learned that they were excluded from planning and attending the award’s luncheon, they were “humiliated and chagrined.” They asserted that “the award was a recognition of the sacrifices and coordinated efforts of ALL the residents of the community, to be accepted and enjoyed by every segment of the population.” In addition to the protest letter, the African

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6 “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Lawrence Morgan Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Special Collections and University Archives, Patricia W. and J. Douglas Perry Library, Old Dominion University.  
9 “All America City,” _Journal and Guide_, March 5, 1960.  
American leaders had “lodged” several protests with the publishers of *Look Magazine* and the National Municipal League, the co-sponsors of the award, asserting that the city’s white elites had purposefully excluded them in a “deliberate” and “studied” fashion. Vivian C. Mason, a prominent African American leader in Norfolk and the president of Norfolk’s National Council of Negro Women, asserted in a letter to *Look Magazine* that “Norfolk is not an ‘All-America’ City. It does not deserve this award….‘All-America’ is something more than slum clearance and industrial might. ‘All America’ means just what it says: ‘All America’—all the people, regardless of race, color, or creed!”

*Look Magazine* and the National Municipal League responded by denouncing Norfolk’s leaders’ failure to invite African Americans to the ceremonies. They commented that they were “gravely concerned that a city upon which they had conferred the accolade of ‘All America’ had arranged its acceptance ceremonies in such an un-American manner.” In an attempt to appease the co-sponsors, Norfolk’s leaders decided to hold an official award’s presentation open to all citizens, including African Americans, one hour prior to the luncheon in the City Council Chamber, which remained exclusive. The “eleventh-hour invitation” to the official presentation did not placate Norfolk’s African American community.

Norfolk’s African American leaders utilized newspapers to voice their displeasure. In a *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot* newspaper article, African American leaders asserted that the city leaders’ invitation to the official award’s presentation had been disingenuous and “arranged only after complaints about the luncheon reached sponsors of the award.”

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Norfolk Journal and Guide, the city’s prominent African American newspaper, African American leaders asserted that “our city administration adheres to the philosophy that Negroes, who comprise one-fourth of the population, must ever be totally excluded from every facet of official action and activity. We cannot condone that thinking by participating in a part of the ceremony at another location arranged for the sole purpose of limiting Negro participating that bare minimum.”16 In response, City Manager Thomas F. Maxwell stated that “the award luncheon was a private affair arranged by civic clubs,” pompously noting that “if there are any Negro members of these clubs they could attend, although I doubt that there are any.”17 Norfolk’s African Americans were not amused. In response, “civic, church, fraternal, professional and business leaders of Norfolk’s colored community” urged all African Americans to boycott the official awards ceremony, stating that “the opportunity offered Negroes is too little, and too late.”18

Norfolk’s African American leaders did not stop with their letter of disapproval. Harry A. Reid, the chairman of Norfolk’s CORE chapter, knew the awards luncheon presented an opportunity to demonstrate to the nation the irony behind Norfolk’s All-America City Award and highlight race issues in the city. Thus, Reid wrote City Manager Maxwell requesting to peacefully protest the highly publicized awards luncheon. In his letter, Reid laid out exactly how the protest would transpire: “the demonstration – signs carried by not fewer than five persons and not more than 10 persons - will be a silent, peaceful protest that a segregated city is not in fact an All-American city and that an All-American city would not exclude its Negro population from any celebration of its having been so chosen.”19 Maxwell responded that he did not

“understand the reason for the request at all” despite the specific details Reid laid out for him. Maxwell wrote back that he did not “know what they are planning to do and what they expect to get out of it.”

Maxwell failed to understand the “enormous personal hardships” that Norfolk’s African American community endured throughout the decade. City leaders used “urban renewal powers” to demolish the city’s slums, “tear down mixed-race areas,” and preserve residential segregation through public housing. They “remov[ed] and contain[ed]” Norfolk’s African Americans. Maxwell, like other city leaders, did not understand Reid’s protest request because he did not recognize the tremendous suffering that African Americans experienced as the city built “A New Norfolk.”

Despite Maxwell’s indifference towards the African American plight, the demonstrators still required his approval to lawfully protest. Per Norfolk’s city ordinance, the city manager had the power to determine whether or not “a demonstration or assemblage in a public place will not unreasonably interfere with the public use thereof, and will not tend to disturb or imperil the public safety or the public peace or otherwise be inimical to the public welfare, he may grant a permit therefor.” Thus, Maxwell had the sole authority to determine whether or not a protest met the city ordinance’s criteria, and if it did not, violators would “be punished by a fine of $5 to $500 or up to six months in jail or both.” Ultimately, Maxwell ignored Reid’s request, and noted in a Norfolk Virginian-Pilot newspaper article the day before the awards luncheon that “he

21 White, Pride and Prejudice, 34.
22 White, Pride and Prejudice, 291, 294.
23 Littlejohn and Ford, Elusive Equality, 38.
24 White, Pride and Prejudice, 2.
had been too busy to decide the matter but that in any event he believed the permit would be

denied.”27 As expected, Maxwell never issued a permit.

Despite the protest letter signed by Norfolk’s prominent African American leaders that
 urged “the Negro community” to boycott the official awards ceremony, two African Americans,
 Reverend Eugene Brown and another unknown man, attended the ceremony.28 Brown, “a
 minister who unfailingly attends Council sessions,” also gave the invocation.29 In a conciliatory
 and submissive manner, Brown praised the city’s slum clearance program for rescuing “black
 folk living in squalor,” paying homage to city leaders’ white paternalism.30 One hour later, not a
 single African American socialized or dined during the awards luncheon in the City Arena,
 highlighting Maxwell’s comment that “Negro members” of the “private” civic clubs could
 attend, but doubted “there [were] any.”31

In the main address at the luncheon, Look Magazine’s publisher Vernon C. Myers never
 addressed the discriminatory way Norfolk’s leaders arranged the acceptance ceremonies and
 never acknowledged the protesters who stood silently outside in the cold. Rather, he praised
 Norfolk’s leaders and “the mighty citizen effort” to eliminate the city’s slums.32 He noted that
 “citizens rescued Norfolk from the brink of disaster to earn” the All-America City Award.33
 Appeasing the white audience, he stated “out of a city whose problems had multiplied almost to
 the point of disaster, a city plagued by organized vice and disease, branded for its slums by
 housing authorities, choked by a population boom - out of this dismal picture of a community,

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32 Parramore, Stewart, and Bogger, The First Four Centuries, 360.
Norfolk citizens are creating a city with a bright new character.”34 Myers politely addressed the issue of race as a “situation in the South,” but one he “need not point out.”35 He expressed sympathy for southern whites, stating that “an All-America city in the South is on a particularly vulnerable spot.”36 Myers never used the word “race,” but rather subtly suggested that the way in which Norfolk handled race issues played a crucial role in the U.S.’s fight against Communism. He stated:

How you handle your relations with all your citizens in the coming years can have a profound bearing on the respect in which American democracy is held throughout the world. Without exaggeration, it could well be one of the deciding factors in the battle of the West against communism. I feel confident Norfolk will stand up to its responsibilities. That your responsibilities are greater than those of other cities will not frighten you. You have already made tremendous progress, and I predict that you will continue to make progress with increasing wisdom and vitality.37

As Norfolk’s white elite dined, celebrated, and listened to congratulatory remarks of their “tremendous progress,” “wisdom,” and “vitality,” members of the Norfolk CORE, including Joseph A. Jordan Jr., quietly picketed outside despite not having a permit. Around the same time as the protest, several African Americans students from the Norfolk Division of Virginia State College (renamed Norfolk State University in 1969) sat down at the Norfolk department store lunch counters of S.S. Kresge Co., F.W. Woolworth’s and W.T. Grant Co. Although they had been told to leave, caused a “sharp decline in white patronage of the counters during the midday rush hour,” and never received service while the whites around them did, the African American students remained at the lunch counters for hours.38 During the previous month, African American students across the South, notably in Greensboro, North Carolina and in Nashville, Tennessee, challenged Jim Crow through nonviolent sit-in demonstrations. By sitting at the

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department store lunch counters, the African American students in Norfolk joined in the mounting Civil Rights Movement across the country and sent a loud message of defiance to the white citizens of Norfolk.

A few months later, Norfolk’s African American leaders drafted another protest letter contending that there is nothing “‘All-American’ in allowing four-footed police pups to take over” African American neighborhoods.39 Protesting police dogs that had continually harassed innocent people on the streets, the African American leaders demanded “to know when it became ‘illegal’ for a pedestrian to pause even momentarily to greet a friend.”40 They cited in detail incidences of abuse in predominantly African American neighborhoods, such as the Berkley Neighborhood and along Church Street, where “some 14 teenagers were halted and frisked by a dog and his companion” and “a kanine kop wreaked havoc.”41 They wrote that “all along the major colored thoroughfares, the dogs are having their day while they are conspicuous by their absence in other areas of the city,” concluding that “it's a dog-gone shame that an All-American city has to go to the dogs the way Norfolk is going.”42

African Americans in Norfolk, like those in cities across America, lived in real fear. They lived in a place where they were constantly harassed on the streets by police dogs, a place that denied them service at lunch counters, and a place that excluded them from citywide events. The protests and the sit-ins that took place in Norfolk in the spring of 1960 had been part of a larger, nation-wide uprising of African Americans. Yet, the long and unique history of segregation in Norfolk significantly influenced what and how Norfolk’s African American community protested. Unique to other urban places in America, Norfolk’s leaders had taken unprecedented

steps to modernize their city through massive urban renewal projects. After renovating the city’s highway system, erecting new hospitals and health centers, and growing the city’s industrial and business capacity, Norfolk’s leaders had many accomplishments to tout. They had indeed liberated Norfolk “from decades of ill-fortune and scathing rebuke.”43 However, the city’s growth and development came largely at the cost of the general welfare of the city’s African American community because public housing remained segregated. When Norfolk received the 1959 All-America City Award, the national sponsors praised Norfolk for the many improvements made throughout the city, but ignored the price that many had to pay for the city’s progress. The following thesis seeks to demonstrate how Norfolk arrived at this moment in the spring of 1960 and why “old fences of racial separation” remained intact for so long.44

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43 Parramore, Stewart, and Bogger, *The First Four Centuries*, 360.
44 Parramore, Stewart, and Bogger, *The First Four Centuries*, 361.
CHAPTER III
“EXCEEDED THE LAWS:”
CITY ORDINANCES, RESTRICTIVE COVENANTS, AND WHITE TERROR

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, state and city governments throughout the southern United States passed numerous laws that enforced segregation. In his seminal work, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, C. Vann Woodward noted that such laws did not serve as “an adequate index of the extent and prevalence of segregation and discriminatory practices in the South” because other practices, such as restrictive covenants, “often anticipated and sometimes exceeded the laws.”¹ Norfolk, Virginia was no exception.

Before 1890, African Americans and whites in Norfolk lived side-by-side each other in what historian Earl Lewis described as a “keyboard pattern of alternating rows” of houses.² However, when fin de siècle ideas of racism “reached a crest of acceptability and popularity” and the U.S. Supreme Court decided the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in 1896, which justified segregation through the “separate but equal” rule and decreed that “legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts,” the “keyboard pattern” of houses in Norfolk began to disappear.³ 10 years after *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Norfolk passed a city ordinance that mandated separate seating assignments for African Americans on Norfolk streetcars.⁴ Then in 1914, Norfolk passed a city ordinance that segregated the city’s streets unlike any other place in the country. The ordinance, which Woodward described as a “complicated law,” made it ‘unlawful for any white person to use as a residence or place of abode any house, building, or structure, or any part thereof, located in any

² Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, 18.
⁴ Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, 22.
colored block” and stipulated the same for any “colored person” attempting to live on a “white block.” If someone violated the ordinance by moving onto the block of the opposite race or if “the owner or agent of any building” sold their home to the opposite race, they would be “guilty of a misdemeanor” and fined “not less than five nor more than fifty dollars.”

Despite the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in _Buchanan v. Warley_ (1917), which ruled that residential segregation ordinances were unconstitutional, Norfolk City Managers, such as Walke Truxton, Colonel W.B. Causey, and Charles E. Ashburner, asserted that Norfolk’s ordinance was constitutional because it applied equally to whites and African Americans. The discriminatory city ordinance “exceeded the law,” but through clever and devious language and the lack of any federal interest in enforcing the law, Norfolk’s leaders were able to segregate their city without any interference from the state or federal governments.

When African Americans challenged the city ordinance, Norfolk’s white citizenry responded with violence. In 1923, an African American family, which “consider[ed] itself white,” moved onto an all-white street in Norfolk. In response, somewhere between 80 and 100 armed white citizens, including a member of Norfolk’s City Council, “converged on the home and ordered the family to move immediately.” Norfolk’s white community, like others across the United States, used scare tactics to enforce segregation, even for African Americans with lighter complexions who were “near-white.”

One year after the incident in Norfolk, African American communities across the country suffered a major blow when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the National Association for

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6 Charter. City Code § 11, (Segregation) (1914).
7 Lewis, _In Their Own Interests_, 77.
9 Lewis, _In Their Own Interests_, 77.
the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in *Corrigan v. Buckley* (1924), deciding that restrictive covenants were constitutional. Restrictive covenants, which allowed real estate agents, housing developers, and insurance companies the ability to limit loans and the sale of properties to those of a preferred race, restricted African Americans from fair housing opportunities across the country. Ultimately, white Americans relegated African Americans to the “lowest rung of the ladder” and forced them into the least desirable parts of American cities through de jure and de facto forms of segregation.

African Americans in Norfolk directly challenged the Supreme Court’s discriminatory ruling. In 1926, Kelly Miller, an African American resident of Norfolk, wrote an editorial titled “Have We A New Dred Scott Decision?” in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* newspaper, questioning the Supreme Court’s *Corrigan v. Buckley* decision. Asserting that “neither state nor city can legally restrict the use of property on racial grounds,” Miller believed that the Supreme Court’s decision exceeded the law. He acknowledged that African Americans should “naturally expect” communities to “experiment with all variety of devises to accomplish segregation without violating the Supreme Court decision,” referring to *Buchanan v. Warley*, but that they should not stand by idly. He argued that although “whites [had] won the first battle,” African Americans should purposefully move into restricted areas of the city “to further test the validity of these restrictive covenants.” Since the attorneys in *Corrigan v. Buckley* challenged restrictive covenants on the “ground of race discrimination,” Miller proposed that African Americans adopt a new approach and challenge the ruling “without reference to the narrow issue

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13 Kelly Miller, “Have We A New Dred Scott Decision?,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, June 12, 1926.
of race,” but “on the ground of restrictive use of property.” In closing, Miller praised “the courage and determination of the colored men and women who jeopardized their own selfish interests” and “risked a clouded title to their own property in order that racial right of residence might be legally tested and determined.” These “high-minded colored citizens,” defied both de jure and de facto forms of segregation in Norfolk, and in doing so, risked their own lives.

In the early 1920s, Norfolk real estate men, a city councilman, and Norfolk’s City Manager Ashburner decided that “no property was to be sold to colored people on Corprew Avenue,” a street in one of the oldest sections of the city. Furthermore, Corprew Avenue would serve as a “line of demarcation” between races in Norfolk’s Brambleton neighborhood. The real estate men and city officials singlehandedly established a restrictive covenant that segregated an entire neighborhood. They decreed that Corprew Avenue would divide a “white Brambleton and a colored residential section,” which was partitioned off by three other roads. Despite the lack of a formal city meeting and ruling, both races reacted to the restrictive covenant. Hundreds of white families, including the entire “aristocratic element of whites,” moved away from this borderland “to more desirable white communities” while their homes remained “unsold or vacant.” Whites who owned homes on Corprew Avenue and in “white Brambleton” wanted to sell their properties, but white purchasers did not risk moving to an area where they would be “practically surrounded by the expansion of Negro housing developments.” Furthermore, if African Americans violated the restrictive covenant, they

would be met by “methods of intimidation,” which had been used “on several previous occasions.”

In 1925, the Brown Realty Company sold two homes in the 1200 block of Corprew Avenue to African Americans. In response, “a hundred or more white men” marched to the two homes and “ordered the occupants to move out of their homes within twenty-four hours.” They did not stop there. The mob, which consisted mostly of members of the Brambleton Civic League, continued on to G.W.C. Brown’s house, the African American general manager of the realty company. There they found Brown’s wife home alone, but they “left word” that Mr. Brown “should cancel all outstanding agreements to sell property on Corprew Avenue, and refund deposits or payments made on purchases, or ‘it would not be pleasant for him.’” Upon hearing the commotion, a neighbor, who coincidentally had the last name Brown, stepped out of his home. When the crowd heard his name, they “started to handle him roughly” until they realized they had the wrong man. When the neighbor returned home, he phoned the Norfolk Police, but only two policemen showed up long after the incident was over. Ultimately, white terror, which was largely ignored by the police, ensured that restrictive covenants and discriminatory city ordinances were followed in Norfolk.

City ordinances, restrictive covenants, and white terror confined Norfolk’s African Americans into sectioned-off and undesirable neighborhoods. Without the ability to move into newer homes, like the “substantial frame houses” found on Corprew Avenue, African Americans were literally trapped. To aggravate their plight further, Norfolk’s African Americans were

denied basic public services and loans to improve their homes. Roads in Norfolk literally shifted from pavement to dirt at the edge of African American neighborhoods. Norfolk developed “an elaborate system of computing the percentage of property taxes paid by each race” and used the data “as determinants of how the public works budgets would be spent.” Consequently, the city left African American neighborhoods with “no sidewalks, streetlights, gutters, curbs, parks, playgrounds, or recreation areas.” The lack of mobility, support, and investment inevitably turned African American neighborhoods into blighted areas.

Powhatan S. Schneck, Norfolk’s city health commissioner, circulated a report in 1920 that exposed the health effects of “small, stuffy, and unsanitary dwellings” in the city. He reported that “the death rate for Norfolk whites in 1920 approached 8.5% per 1,000, but the death rate for blacks stood at 20% per 1,000.” He also found that one in every 20 white babies died before the age of one, whereas one in every six African American babies died before one. “Poor housing conditions and stagnant city water in low-lying areas” contributed significantly to the disparity between the death rates between African Americans and whites. Furthermore, “visible poverty, overcrowding, and deteriorating houses” fit neatly into Norfolk’s white citizens’ perception of a racial hierarchy. Filth and dirt became synonymous with immorality and impurity. Ultimately, Norfolk’s white citizens pointed to the slums as evidence of African American inferiority.

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33 Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, 80.
34 Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, 80.
35 Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, 81.
36 Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, 80.
In 1926, Reverend Bowling, an African American pastor, preached on the damaging
effects of discriminatory practices in Norfolk and proclaimed that many more would suffer if
Norfolk’s white citizens did not relinquish their “attitude of racial exclusiveness.”

In a passionate sermon that was covered by the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, Reverend Bowling
asserted that Norfolk’s segregation ordinance “hems the black brother in and keeps his death and
sick rate high, his economic status low, his living conditions crowded and a disgrace to any
modern city.”

Appealing to notions of the greater good, he proclaimed that the “evil effects” of
the city ordinance not only kept African Americans on the “the lowest rung of the ladder,” but
debilitated Norfolk as a whole from becoming a “great metropolis.”

Reverend Bowling’s plea
to Norfolk’s white citizens fell on deaf ears and white attitudes toward African American
inferiority persisted.

Almost a decade after Reverend Bowling’s sermon, Dr. C. Gordon, a white pastor of First
Christian Church, preached to his congregation on the “moral debauchery” of Norfolk’s slums.

Gordon made a passionate plea for a “thoroughgoing constructive crusade” against vice in
Norfolk. He stated that the “Five D’s” of “drink, disease, divorce, destitution, and dirt” were
ruining Norfolk, and that it was “time for all of the decent elements,” alluding to Norfolk’s white
citizenry, “to rise against these conditions.”

Gordon asserted that the “City Fathers, councilors, and civic leaders” possessed “the intelligence and moral aspiration of our community” to lead the
righteous crusade against the slums.

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41 “‘Unspeakably Filthy’ Slum Condition In City Denounced By Minister,” *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, May 11, 1936.
42 “‘Unspeakably Filthy’,” *Virginian-Pilot*, May 11, 1936.
43 “‘Unspeakably Filthy’,” *Virginian-Pilot*, May 11, 1936.
44 “‘Unspeakably Filthy’,” *Virginian-Pilot*, May 11, 1936.
Throughout the ensuing decades, several Norfolk leaders heeded Gordon’s call. Dr. W. Gerald Akers, a faculty member of the Norfolk Division, College of William and Mary (renamed Old Dominion University in 1969), joined Gordon in a presentation titled a “Peep at Norfolk slums” at the Sabbath School Building of Ohef Sholom Temple. Judge H. G. Cochran of Norfolk’s Juvenile Court listed “clearing of slums as most important of 11 suggestions on how to curb crime.” Dr. John Huff, Norfolk’s Public Health Director, “sounded repeated warnings regarding the epidemic dangers of crime and contagion in the city’s slums.” Ultimately, African American neighborhoods in Norfolk turned into blighted areas because of discriminatory city ordinances, restrictive covenants, and white terror. When the poor condition of African American neighborhoods started to reflect on the city as a whole, as Reverend Bowling predicted they would in 1926, Norfolk’s white citizens cultivated “enough civic shame” to rally many into motion against “this evil.”

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45 “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
46 “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
CHAPTER IV

FEDERAL INITIATIVES REINFORCE NORFOLK SEGREGATION

While local practices that exceeded the law, such as discriminatory city ordinances, restrictive covenants, and white terror, established residential segregation and created slums in Norfolk during the 1910s and 1920s, federal policies during the 1930s and 1940s opened a space for Norfolk’s city leaders to lawfully maintain and perpetuate residential segregation. Federal initiatives in Norfolk “legitimated systematic discrimination against African Americans in housing” on three separate occasions: through the creation of Residential Security Maps by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC), through a real estate survey of Norfolk’s slums by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and through the debate that ensued from the United States Housing Authority’s (USHA) insistence that a local housing authority be created.¹ With each initiative, federal officials worked closely with Norfolk city leaders to analyze Norfolk’s blighted areas. Subsequently, Norfolk’s city leaders used the federal government’s maps, surveys, and guidance for urban renewal projects that further preserved residential segregation in Norfolk.

REDLINING NORFOLK’S SLUMS

The National Housing Act of 1934, a part of the New Deal that created the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the HOLC, aimed to prevent home foreclosures, extend the life of home mortgages through lower-interest rates, make homeownership more affordable

¹ Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis, 44.
across the U.S. during the Depression era, and help revive the home-building industry.\textsuperscript{2} The Act intended to protect homeowners from market fluctuations by relieving them from the “burden of excessive interest and principle payments incurred during a period of higher values and higher earning power.”\textsuperscript{3} Furthermore, the creation of the HOLC, which was designed to specifically “serve urban needs,” allowed homeowners to refinance a mortgage into a “long-term, self-amortizing mortgage with uniform payments spread over the whole life of the debt.”\textsuperscript{4} The HOLC program changed the amortization period of mortgages in the U.S. from a five to 10 year range to a 20 to 25 year range, allowing more middle-class Americans to buy homes.\textsuperscript{5}

Overall, the Act had a significant effect in Norfolk. Homeowners who were at risk of foreclosing or defaulting on their home found immediate relief from the federal government. In May of 1936, State Senator John A. Lesner, president of the Mutual Federal Savings and Loan Association of Norfolk, noted that Norfolk’s citizens were “becoming more interested in homeowning than has been the case for several years.”\textsuperscript{6} He noted that “during the past six months more people applied for loans with which to build new houses and modernize old ones than at any time since the beginning of the depression.”\textsuperscript{7} While attributing the increase in loan applications in part to Norfolk’s “improved business conditions” and “partly to the extensive advertising of the Federal Housing Administration,” he believed “the greatest single factor ha[d] been the adoption by building and loan associations of simplified lending methods” created by the federal government.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{3} Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 196.
\textsuperscript{4} Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 196.
\textsuperscript{5} Koziol, “Mapping RVA,” Online Exhibitions.
\textsuperscript{7} “Simpler Loan Methods,” Virginian-Pilot, May 10, 1936.
\textsuperscript{8} “Simpler Loan Methods,” Virginian-Pilot, May 10, 1936.
While the HOLC program allowed Americans with modest incomes to own homes and prevented over one million foreclosures in the U.S., the program systematized discriminatory appraisal methods and coined the term “redlining,” which “refers to the practice of denying or charging more for services like banking and insurance.” Since the HOLC dealt with “problem mortgages,” or mortgages that might foreclose even after refinancing, they had to make “predictions and assumptions” concerning the permanence of homes or “useful productive life of housing it financed.” Through comprehensive questionnaires and working closely with local real estate offices, the HOLC program divided cities across the U.S. into neighborhoods, assigned a grade to each neighborhood, and transcribed their findings onto Residential Security Maps. The grading system, described by historian Kenneth T. Jackson, worked as follows:

Four categories of quality—imaginatively entitled First, Second, Third, and Fourth, with corresponding code letters of A, B, C, and D and colors of green, blue, yellow, and red—were established. The First grade (also A and green) were areas described as new, homogeneous, and “in demand as residential locations in good times and bad.” Homogeneous meant “American business and professional men.” …The second security grade (blue) went to “still desirable” areas that had “reached their peak,” but were expected to remain stable for many years. The Third grade (yellow or “C”) neighborhoods were usually described as “definitely declining,” while the Fourth grade (red) neighborhoods were defined as areas “in which the things taking place in C areas have already happened.”

In his seminal work on the evolution of urban America, Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States, Jackson asserted that the HOLC’s appraisal methods helped institutionalize residential segregation in the U.S. Since racial composition and the social homogeneity of neighborhoods played a major factor in the HOLC grading system, the Residential Security Maps validated and encouraged residential segregation by race.

Furthermore, the HOLC consistently rated African American neighborhoods as “Fourth grade,”

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10 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 197.
11 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 197.
12 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 197.
demonstrating that the federal surveyors valued white homeownership over African American homeownership. Jackson noted that HOLC “did not initiate the idea of considering race” in real estate appraising. As demonstrated in Norfolk, practices that exceeded the law denied African Americans loans long before the passage of the National Housing Act of 1934. However, the HOLC program codified discriminatory practices into law and applied notions of “racial worth to real estate appraising on an unprecedented scale.”

In 1940, the Division of Research and Statistics of the Federal Home Loan Bank Board and the Appraisal Department of HOLC published the Residential Security Maps of “Greater Norfolk and Surrounding Area,” which included “Norfolk, Portsmouth, South Norfolk, Newport News, Hampton, Phoebus and Vicinity.” The map depicted every single Norfolk African American neighborhood in red and rated each as “Fourth grade.” Norfolk’s bankers, builders, developers, and city leaders had withheld investments from African American neighborhoods for decades, but with the publication of the HOLC maps, they now had federal support to further withhold investments. Ultimately, the publication of the Norfolk HOLC map validated Norfolk’s prior discriminatory housing practices and emboldened Norfolk’s leaders to continue to divide the city by race.

13 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 198.
14 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 198.
15 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 199.
Figure (1) “Greater Norfolk and Surrounding Area: Norfolk, Portsmouth, South Norfolk, Newport News, Hampton, Phoebus and Vicinity.”
Published in 1940 by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation
Across the country residents of neighborhoods that received “Fourth grade” were “unlikely to qualify for mortgages and home loans.”\textsuperscript{16} Banks in Newark, New Jersey in the late 1930s responded to a Federal Home Loan Bank Board questionnaire, which asked “‘Are there any areas in which loans will not be made?’” with “‘red and most yellow,’ ‘C and D,’ ‘Newark,’ ‘not in red,’ and ‘D areas.’”\textsuperscript{17} In Richmond, Virginia, “a red line delineated neighborhoods not fit for investment” and resulted in “lack of investment in predominantly African-American neighborhoods.”\textsuperscript{18} In St. Louis, Missouri, the Federal Home Loan Bank Board noted after a survey on the economic and real-estate prospects of the St. Louis metropolitan area of the “problem in the maintenance of real estate values” in African American neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{19} Despite the many housing reforms of the National Housing Act of 1934, banks, builders, and developers across the country received “little or no financial backing” if they chose to invest and build “in such risky neighborhoods” as “Fourth graded” areas.\textsuperscript{20} In Norfolk, the HOLC map formally endorsed the decades of neglect and discriminatory housing practices in African American neighborhoods and proved to Norfolk’s business and city leaders that the federal government sanctioned residential segregation since racial composition and social homogeneity factored into the HOLC’s rating system.

SURVEYING NORFOLK’S SLUMS

Between 1935 and 1940, Norfolk’s city leaders aggressively pursued federal resources to “eliminate” the slums.\textsuperscript{21} In 1935, City Manager Thomas P. Thompson created a committee called

\textsuperscript{16} Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis, 44.
\textsuperscript{17} Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 203.
\textsuperscript{18} Koziol, “Mapping RVA,” Online Exhibitions.
\textsuperscript{19} Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 201.
\textsuperscript{20} Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis, 44.
\textsuperscript{21} “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
the Citizens Slum Committee (CSC), which consisted of Norfolk’s “leading citizens” Charles L. Kaufman, L.H. Windholz, David Pender, George H. Lewis and C. W. Grandy. Thompson tasked the CSC with conducting “a study of slum districts in Norfolk with the hope of obtaining federal funds to eliminate them.” Specifically, they studied the African American neighborhood east of Bank Street, north of Main Street, and as far as Huntersville “in an effort to launch slum clearance projects which would qualify for share of President Roosevelt’s $4,889,000,000 public works program then before Congress.” Thompson and the CSC not only hoped to eliminate the city’s slums through federal funding, but also “put men back to work” since significant labor would be required to clear the slums.

The CSC’s study garnered enough attention that the assistant director of housing for the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, Paul M. Pearson, visited the city. During his trip to Norfolk, Thompson requested that the WPA, a federally-funded organization created from the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935, conduct a real estate survey “according to standardized Federal manual.” Thompson knew that such results “would be invaluable” if federal funding became available later. Pearson accepted Thompson’s request, and in 1936, the WPA conducted a survey titled “Property and Land Use Survey by the WPA” to evaluate the state of Norfolk’s housing.

After analyzing 2,118 living units, the WPA found that “only 159 of these were found in good condition; 690 needed major repairs; 205 were totally unfit for human habitation; only 535 provided flush toilets, and 1,502 did not; in many cases the toilet had to do for several families;
444 had baths, 1604 had not.” In a specific study of a predominantly African American neighborhood south of Cedar Grove Cemetery, the WPA found that of the 954 dwellings in this area, only 65 were classified as “good,” 435 needed “minor repairs,” 389 needed “major repairs,” and 65 were “unfit for use.” 52 had flush toilets, 900 had not; 34 had baths and 918 had not; 903 had running water either inside or out, while 51 had no water. The WPA survey exposed the abysmal state of Norfolk’s African American housing. However, it also qualified the city for federal funds if they became available and laid out exactly where the “festering centers of filth” lay in the city.

In the same year that HOLC published Norfolk’s Residential Security Map, the head administrator of the Federal Housing Authority, Nathan Straus, toured Norfolk’s slums to assess whether Norfolk should receive special federal funding for slum clearance. After visiting “a large apartment house or ‘hotel’ in the Negro section,” Straus commented that “it was without a doubt the worst slum he had seen anywhere in the United States.” After seeing such abysmal conditions, Straus assured Norfolk’s city leaders that Norfolk would be “first on the list when any additional funds [were] available either from Congressional appropriations, savings on other projects or recapture from projects which may be abandoned elsewhere.” The decades of discriminatory housing practices in Norfolk and the city’s neglect of African American neighborhoods put Norfolk at the top of the list for federal aid and assistance.

While the federal agency HOLC endorsed the decades of neglect and discriminatory housing practices in African American neighborhoods through the publication of Norfolk’s Residential Security Maps, the federal government documented the city’s slums via the WPA

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28 “‘Unspeakably Filthy’,” Virginian-Pilot, May 11, 1936.
29 “‘Unspeakably Filthy’,” Virginian-Pilot, May 11, 1936.
30 “Straus Sees ‘Worst Slum’: Clearance Funds Expected; Projects Starts,” Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch, October 19, 1940.
31 “Straus Sees ‘Worst Slum’,” Ledger-Dispatch, October 19, 1940.
and promised federal aid for their elimination. “Redlining” Norfolk’s neighborhoods and publishing the state of Norfolk’s housing based on federal standards revealed exactly what houses and what neighborhoods required removal. Ultimately, the federal government opened a space for Norfolk’s leaders to act on their prejudices by reinforcing residential segregation through various initiatives.
CHAPTER V

UNDERLYING PREJUDICES:
THE DEBATE OVER A LOCAL HOUSING AUTHORITY

On September 1, 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the U.S. Housing Act of 1937, known as the Wagner-Steagall Act. The Act reformed the National Housing Act of 1934, established the USHA, and created “a color of practicality for the new low-cost housing effort that was largely absent from the Federal slum-clearance effort that preceded it.”\(^1\) Upon President Roosevelt’s signing of the new law, the New York Times reported that “at last America makes a real start toward wiping out its city slums.”\(^2\) Such “real” efforts included granting the newly founded USHA the power to issue loans “up to 90 per cent of the cost slum-clearance projects to local housing agencies with the localities contributing the other 10 per cent.”\(^3\) However, in order to receive federal funds, states had to pass an enabling act that would allow localities the ability to capitalize on the federal funds. Subsequently, cities had to create a housing authority that would work directly with the USHA. Two small hurdles stood in the way of Norfolk’s leaders’ desire to eliminate the city’s slums.

In a final vote in the State General Assembly, the Virginia Senate voted 32 to 3 in favor of the enabling act, overwhelmingly supporting slum removal throughout Virginia.\(^4\) The enabling act, which was of a “purely permission character,” opened the door for Norfolk’s leaders to participate in the USHA program.\(^5\) After the passage of the Virginia enabling act, Hugh R. Pomeroy, a field representative of the National Association of Housing Officials, met

\(^1\) “For a Housing Enabling Act,” Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, September 24, 1937.
\(^2\) Quoted in Jackson’s Crabgrass Frontier, 224.
\(^3\) “Housing Enabling,” Virginian-Pilot, September 24, 1937.
\(^4\) “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
\(^5\) “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
with a group of “interested citizens” in Norfolk to discuss the “only way to eliminate slums.”

The federal representative laid out the specific steps Norfolk had to take to receive federal funds for slum removal. He told them they had to simply create a housing authority that would determine the “cost of constructing new buildings to replace those unfit for people to live in, apply to the Federal Housing Administration for a loan and get the project under way.”

Norfolk’s leaders and citizens listened attentively and reacted favorably to the federal field representative’s guidance. Shortly after the meeting, a delegation of Norfolk civic leaders appealed to Norfolk’s City Council, requesting “action on slum clearance program.” In response to the civic leaders’ plea, the City Council requested a report on slum conditions from City Manager Charles B. Borland. Borland immediately launched an investigation and stated he would “report back to City Council on [the] question of appointing a local housing authority.”

In his inquiry, Borland looked to the CSC for results. Borland found that the CSC, which was appointed in 1935 by City Manager Thomas P. Thompson, “obtained a lot of information, made surveys and platted various areas,” but never created an official report on Norfolk’s slums.

While the WPA published their survey on Norfolk housing in 1936, the CSC failed to publish any recommendations or course of actions of their own. Regardless, Charles L. Kaufman, the chairman of the CSC, assured Borland that the CSC found slum clearance “not only desirable, but in the opinion of his committee, imperative” and that City Surveyor David Callander had all the CSC’s material.

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6 “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
7 “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
8 “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
9 “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
While Borland’s investigation went on, Norfolk’s newspapers weighed in on the discussion and began publishing articles in favor of the creation of a local housing authority. An editor for the *Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch* newspaper pointed out that “the elimination of slum dwellings by federal aid through the states is now established as a national policy” and that federal funds would bring “profit to this community.”\(^{12}\) Emphasizing his conservative stance on federal spending, the editor noted that “the *Ledger-Dispatch* is and has always been reserved to approve spending of public funds.”\(^{13}\) He sympathized “with all those who have been disturbed and alarmed over the Federal spending program of the last few years,” referring to New Deal expenditures.\(^{14}\) However, he believed slum-removal was an acceptable cause for spending public money. Speaking on behalf of the newspaper, the editor asserted that when federal funds “can be used to advantage in meeting any public need it is the part of wisdom, we believe, to avail ourselves of such funds whenever possible.”\(^{15}\)

By making slum removal “a national policy,” the federal government helped Norfolk’s citizens and leaders justify the removal of the city’s blighted areas.\(^{16}\) According to the editor, “slum clearance is bound to appeal to the thoughtful citizen,” inferring that it should go unchallenged.\(^{17}\) By 1939, “33 states had passed enabling legislation, and 221 local authorities had been established.”\(^{18}\) Upon the passage of the enabling act, citizens who could vote expressed strong support for the creation of a local housing authority and it appeared Norfolk would quickly join the list of cities. However, the support quickly waned when a group of Norfolk realtors brought to light new concerns.

\(^{12}\) “Create the Housing Authority,” *Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch*, June 15, 1939.

\(^{13}\) “Create the Housing,” *Ledger-Dispatch*, June 15, 1939.

\(^{14}\) “Create the Housing,” *Ledger-Dispatch*, June 15, 1939.

\(^{15}\) “Create the Housing,” *Ledger-Dispatch*, June 15, 1939.

\(^{16}\) “Create the Housing,” *Ledger-Dispatch*, June 15, 1939.

\(^{17}\) “Create the Housing,” *Ledger-Dispatch*, June 15, 1939.

\(^{18}\) Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 224.
On June 15th, 1939, the Norfolk Real Estate Board, chaired by James E. Etheridge, met to discuss the potential consequences that removing Norfolk’s slums might cause. Unlike the majority of Norfolk’s leaders and citizens who hoped to seize federal funds and expeditiously remove the city’s blighted areas, the group of realtors warned that slum clearance was a multifaceted and complicated issue that required further attention. They argued that “the slum clearance program could not be settled until Negroes and other workers were gainfully employed.” They pointed out “it was all very well to build new and modern homes and tenements,” but they wanted to know “who was going to pay the rent.” The realtors considered the African American’s plight, concluding that they “had a hard time meeting the rent question now [and] would have a harder time meeting the rent charged for modern housing.” While the CSC gathered information and conducted surveys, they failed to substantially address what would happen to African Americans who lived in the slums if their homes were demolished. Although Norfolk’s Real Estate Board had been mostly concerned with timely and adequate rent payments, they had brought African Americans to the forefront of the debate by publicly opposing the creation of a local housing authority.

In preparation for a slum clearance meeting called by Borland, the Norfolk Real Estate Board created a set of resolutions that objected to the USHA’s slum clearance plan. Led by Otto Hollowell, the executive secretary of the Norfolk Real Estate Board, the group of realtors wanted to make clear to Norfolk’s citizens that the FHA and USHA were “as different as night is

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different from day.” When asked about the resolutions by a local newspaper, Hollowell explained the realtors’ position. He stated:

The FHA is a government insurance agency, insuring loans made by corporations and individuals on homes and other housing projects. The USHA has for its objective slum clearance through the medium of subsidized housing. No objection on the part of realtors has been indicated as far as the FHA plan goes. It simply affords an individual the opportunity to buy a home under a long-term agreement, with a small down payment and monthly installments. USHA slum clearance is something entirely different. It has been shown time after time that the housing afforded under the USHA slum clearance plan is at a rental far above the amount that low-income groups can pay.

Hollowell wanted to clarify the difference between the FHA and USHA because Norfolk’s citizens responded favorably, as State Senator John A. Lesner attested in 1936, to the National Housing Act of 1934 that created the FHA. While Hollowell believed USHA’s efforts to eliminate the slums were “admirable,” he and the rest of Norfolk’s realtors argued that African Americans would not be able to pay rent on subsidized housing.

Norfolk’s realtors opposed the USHA’s plan because they knew that clearing the slums would exacerbate Norfolk’s already depressed housing situation for low-income families. While drafting the Norfolk Real Estate Board’s resolutions, one realtor mocked a slum resident “who took everything detachable, from plumbing fixtures to doorknobs-anything that could be sold or bartered-from the premises they occupied.” Another realtor generalized a slum resident as an “element in the population” that would “quickly turn any property into a slum, regardless of improvements made.” Since the vast majority of the city’s slum areas were African American neighborhoods, the realtors suggested that African Americans created slum conditions no matter where they lived. Although the realtors collectively agreed that slum conditions resulted from an

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23 “Real Estate Men Oppose USHA Plan,” Ledger-Dispatch, June 17, 1939.
26 “Real Estate Men Oppose USHA Plan,” Ledger-Dispatch, June 17, 1939.
“economic situation,” the discussion over federal funding brought forth underlying attitudes on race and revealed that they did not want to deal any more than they had to with African Americans.27

On June 19th, 1939, Hollowell presented the Norfolk Real Estate Board’s resolutions to Norfolk’s City Council and about 100 Norfolk citizens. Henry A. Schaufler, a federal project advisor, and Hamilton Rodgers, a USHA attorney, presented and answered questions regarding federal slum clearance projects. In his presentation, Schaufler asserted that Norfolk should be able “to erect a slum clearance project with a maximum rental of $2.40 a room a month.”28 He assured Norfolk’s leaders and citizens that any federal authority would serve as “both banker and consultant” and specifically laid out all finances involved with the project, concluding that Norfolk would pay “no money except that which it advances to the local authority for organizing costs, which is repaid later.”29 Hollowell countered Schaufler’s presentation by stating that the Norfolk Real Estate Board had monitored slum clearance projects “in various sections of the nation for the past several years,” and they had found that the lowest income groups had been unable to pay rent.30 He clarified to the audience that the USHA plan does not “give funds for such projects, but lends them with sufficient safeguard to see that they will be repaid.”31 He argued that the removal of slum areas in one area would lead to slum areas in another since the USHA plan does not mandate that the same number of units destroyed be equally constructed. In response, Schaufler pointed out that in Jacksonville, Florida, the Public Works Administration

27 “Slums Report Ready Soon: Borland Will Submit His Findings Next Week,” Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch, June 20, 1939.
30 “Slums Report Ready Soon,” Ledger-Dispatch, June 20, 1939.
(PWA) housing project “rent was $4.81 a room a month, but a new USHA project there will rent for only $2.36 a room a month; and the old project has been refinanced to rent for $2.81.”  

The debate between Hollowell and Schauffler sparked a series of responses from Norfolk’s citizens as well as from Virginia’s Governor. The realtors’ argument caught the attention of Jay Lewis, a Norfolk citizen, who wrote a Norfolk Journal and Guide article titled “Work and Wagers to Pay Rent or Government Free Housing Necessary.” Lewis agreed with the realtors that without more jobs, there was no feasible way for the city’s African Americans “to meet the rent” or pay for food. He understood that any item in a house, to include “lighting and plumbing fixtures,” “locks, even doorknobs,” must be sold to prevent people from starving. While the realtors derided the neighborhood residents for dismantling their homes, Lewis commiserated with them. Instead of endorsing immediate slum removal, he asked hard questions, like what “if the city council and the city courts ordered the demolition of insanitary and decrepit structures and thus wiped out slum areas, where are the unhoused to find shelter? Where can they go? What can they do if they have no money to pay even the lowest rentals asked for the most humble habitations?” Hollowell’s and Schauffler’s debate caused Lewis and other Norfolk residents to publicly discuss the human side of slum clearance projects.

Lewis offered another option for the city: free public housing. He suggested that the city could “build barracks for the unemployed, round them up, regiment them, know who they are, what they are and where they are,” and after “having rounded them up and housed them, the government can then ponder what to do about them while feeding them.”

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the city had to get rid of “insanitary, ramshackle, tumbledown habitations” for public health and safety reasons, but the city had to either employ those who lived in the slums or provide free housing. Other citizens weighed in and presented what they believed to be the city’s choices as well. Dr. Gerald Akers, the faculty member of the Norfolk Division, College of William and Mary who joined Dr. Gordon in his “crusade,” believed “the situation boil[ed] down to a choice between paying for the upkeep of these slum areas or paying for slum clearance and housing.”

Akers did not suggest the city give more jobs to African Americans, but rather pay for house repairs or provide free housing.

Virginia Governor James H. Price also weighed-in on the debate and praised the USHA’s slum clearance plan. In response to the Governor, Hollowell pointed out that “the commonwealth” contributed nothing “toward subsidized housing,” but rather “it is the localities that will bear the brunt of subsidized housing and they should be allowed to decide without undue political pressure.” Hollowell seized the opportunity to further highlight what might happen if Norfolk worked under federal auspices by noting that one federal slum clearance project in Norfolk would cost nearly $4,000 per dwelling. Appealing to Norfolk’s white middle-class, he asked why should “those who cannot, or will not, work” be given such costly dwellings while “honest, hardworking, self respecting Virginians who live today in attractive homes of their own that cost less than $4,000…pay more and more taxes in order that such persons might live in what may be luxurious quarters?”

According to Hollowell, those who owned decent homes, alluding to Norfolk’s white citizenry, were “honest, hardworking, and self-
respecting” while those who lived in the slums, who were predominantly African Americans, “will not work.”

On June 27th, 1939, the City Council voted against creating a local housing authority by a vote of three to two. In an official statement, the City Council thanked the CSC for their efforts, but ultimately disagreed with them over the USHA plan. Instead of creating subsidized housing with federal funds, the City Council elected to pursue slum removal “by a strict enforcement of our sanitary and building codes,” forcing “the owners of existing sub-standard houses to either raze them or repair them so they would meet the requirement of our sanitary and building codes.” In lockstep with the City Council, James E. Etheridge, president of the Norfolk Real Estate Board, issued a warning to property owners in slum areas to “clean up” and “fix-up” their premises immediately after congratulating the City Council on its ruling. Instead of pushing for further employment for slum residents or advocating for city funds to repair homes in slum areas, both Norfolk’s City Council and realtors blamed those who lived in the slums and the owners for the “insanitary and unsightly properties” and put the onus of fixing blight in the city on their shoulders.

When the first slum removal projects started in the country following the signing of the 1937 Housing Act, President Roosevelt wrote to his head FHA official, Nathan Straus, that “today marks the beginning of a new era in the economic and social life of America. Today, we are launching an attack on the slums of this country which must go forward until every American family has a decent home.”

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44 “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
46 “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
47 “Slum Owners Get Warning,” Ledger-Dispatch, June 28, 1939.
48 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 224.
FHA’s program, Norfolk decided to “attack” its slum problem via strict enforcement of sanitary and building codes. One year after the City Council’s decision, HOLC published Norfolk’s Residential Security Map. Every single African American neighborhood in Norfolk received the lowest grade possible. At the beginning of the 1940s, Norfolk’s leaders not only forced African Americans to “clean up” and “fix-up” their properties, but they also “redlined” their neighborhoods, effectively restricting services from bankers, developers, and builders and leaving them with no outside assistance.

The 1937 Housing Act created an opportunity for Norfolk to eliminate its slums. However, the debate that ensued over the creation of a local housing authority brought forth underlying prejudices as well as a limited recognition of the issues African Americans confronted. Ultimately, the federal act opened a space for Norfolk’s leaders and citizens to publicly debate what to do with Norfolk’s slums and how to ensure every family had “a decent home.”

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49 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 224.
50 “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University. See also, Koziol, “Mapping RVA,” Online Exhibitions.
51 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 224.
CHAPTER VI

AN ACUTE HOUSING SHORTAGE:
NORFOLK DURING A NATIONAL EMERGENCY

WITH OR WITHOUT A LOCAL HOUSING AUTHORITY

As military activity in Norfolk increased before the U.S.’s entry into World War II, the demand for “low-priced houses for [an] increasing number of Army and Navy personnel” grew substantially.\(^1\) In order to meet the new demand, the federal government eliminated any obstacle that prevented it from building new houses to support an impending national emergency. Thus, in the spring of 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt approved the “Act to Expedite Naval Defense and for Other Purposes.” The Act, which authorized the USHA to work with the national defense program, ensured that “those engaged in national defense activities” would have adequate housing near military installations.\(^2\) Furthermore, it eliminated the need for USHA to work “through local interests.”\(^3\)

As a result of the Act, Norfolk’s leaders immediately renewed the discussion regarding a local housing authority. Not only did Norfolk’s leaders hope to retain some influence over housing projects in their city, but they also hoped to establish a new working relationship with the federal government as the U.S. prepared for war. Almost one year after Norfolk’s City Council voted down the USHA’s slum clearance program, Admiral Joseph K. Taussig, Commandant of the Fifth Naval District, asked the City Council to reconsider their decision. Taussig stressed to the City Council that “the government preferred to work out the problem

\(^1\) “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
\(^2\) “Housing Authority Urged By Borland: City Manager Asks Council to Act at Once; Defense Work Increases Demand,” *Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch*, July 23, 1940.
through a local housing authority,” but that he would still “attempt to provide low-priced houses for Naval personnel” with or without a local housing authority.⁴

Shortly after Taussig’s request, City Manager Charles B. Borland insisted that the City Council create a local housing authority. Borland believed that “the city should aid to the utmost in the national defense program” and that there was “a dire need and necessity at this time for low-cost housing.”⁵ In an official report to the City Council, Borland asserted that “the slum conditions in Norfolk cannot be remedied by a strict enforcement of the laws.”⁶ While Borland remained unsure as to the proper course of action regarding Norfolk’s slums, he believed the city should build a close partnership with the federal government, which might lead to future aid.

On July 23rd, 1940, Norfolk’s City Council voted in favor of the creation of a local housing authority. Councilman J. D. Wood, who previously voted against the measure, rescinded his previous opinion and asserted that “the whole housing program can be best solved by the appointment of a local USHA unit to work in harmony with other agencies.”⁷ Additionally, the Norfolk Real Estate Board pledged their support for a local housing authority. In a joint statement, realtors James E. Etheridge and Otto Hollowell asserted that although they remained “opposed in principle to tax free and subsidized housing, recent developments in the national defense program have created an emergency and it would appear that USHA offers the most practical approach to immediate large scale housing that is a necessity in this area.”⁸ As war loomed on the horizon, Norfolk’s City Council and realtors acquiesced to the federal government and established a newfound relationship with federal representatives.

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⁴ “Taussig Says Navy May Build Houses,” Ledger-Dispatch, June 29, 1940.
⁵ “Housing Authority Urged By Borland,” Ledger-Dispatch, July 23, 1940.
⁶ “Housing Authority Urged By Borland,” Ledger-Dispatch, July 23, 1940.
⁷ “Housing Plans Are Awaited: New Authority to Meet When Kaufman Returns,” Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch, July 24, 1940.
⁸ “Housing Plans Are Awaited,” Ledger-Dispatch, July 24, 1940.
Immediately following the City Council’s vote, Mayor John A. Gurkin appointed the same members from the CSC, which included Charles L. Kaufman, David Pender, Louis H. Windholz, George H. Lewis and C. Wiley Grandy, to serve as members of Norfolk’s Housing Authority.⁹ A couple of weeks later, Norfolk received a federal loan of $1.8 million for the construction of 500 homes for white enlisted Navy personnel and their families.¹⁰

WAR AND POST-WAR HOUSING PROJECTS

Throughout the 1940s, the federal governments’ encroachment on Norfolk’s housing market exacerbated the acute housing shortage for the city’s African American community. As thousands of defense workers, both white and black, flooded Norfolk prior to and during World War II, the federal government, working in conjunction with the Norfolk Housing Authority, built a fraction of the number of houses for African American defense workers and their families as they did for white defense workers and their families. Although the USHA earmarked $2 million for slum clearance in January of 1941, the funds were reallocated to defense housing following the attacks on Pearl Harbor.¹¹ When African American veterans returned home from war, they found the housing situation for the African American community worse off than when they left. Furthermore, after promising to build low cost housing for Norfolk’s African American veterans, the federal government retracted their promise and practically forced Norfolk’s African Americans into the city’s slums. Ultimately, the federal government’s presence and influence in Norfolk in the 1940s reinforced segregation throughout the city.

Since defense housing projects were segregated by race, the federal government, working together with the Norfolk Housing Authority, “strengthened overt racial segregation in housing”

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⁹ “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
¹⁰ “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
¹¹ “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.
in the city. Consequently, white citizens enforced neighborhood boundaries, such as Corprew Avenue, with a renewed fervor and aggression. With an insufficient amount of housing in Norfolk, Norfolk’s African Americans were forced “to seek homes in some sections of the city heretofore reserved exclusively for white residents.” African Americans who moved into white neighborhoods, such as the 1500 block on Corprew Avenue and the 900 block of Park Avenue, met a “reign of terror.”

After 1,200 residents living in the white part of the Brambleton neighborhood petitioned the city “to take action to prevent colored residents from moving into white residential areas,” the Norfolk City Council appointed a “biracial committee…to settle the problem.” In their protest letter, the white residents pointed “to what they said was an agreement made 30 years ago by which white and colored citizens had agreed that the dividing line between white and Negro residential areas of Brambleton would be Corprew avenue.” The local branch of the NAACP retorted that “the City of Norfolk cannot circumvent the constitution or fail to conform with the mandate of the Supreme Court by appointing a committee to enter into some sort of gentleman’s agreement to the effect that Negroes shall not be permitted to move or live in designated areas.” They argued that if Norfolk’s residents continued to use race as a factor in deciding where citizens can live, then “we are to remain second-class citizens to be subjected to the whims of disturbing elements of our population.” Another concerned African American wrote in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* that “colored people are humans too and they must live

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17 “Housing Issue is Aired Here,” *Journal and Guide*, June 8, 1946.
18 “Housing Issue is Aired Here,” *Journal and Guide*, June 8, 1946.
By considering race when building defense housing projects, the federal government and Norfolk Housing Authority sanctioned the decades old restrictive covenants that discriminated against the city’s African American population.

Throughout World War II, the federal government and Norfolk Housing Authority constructed a much smaller number of houses for African American defense workers than for white workers. At the beginning of the War, the Federal Public Housing Authority, “with the local authority as agent for both construction and operations,” built a “300 family development for Negroes” called Oak Leaf Park that “solved neither the short-term nor the long-term needs of the community.” After the construction of the Oak Leaf Project, the Hampton Roads Regional Defense Council published “a population and housing report” of defense housings built in Norfolk. They found that in 1940 and 1941, the government constructed 2,212 dwelling units in Norfolk to “house defense workers and member[s] of the naval and military establishments.” Of the 2,212 units, only 300 had been erected for African American workers and families and 1,912 units for white defense workers and their families. Furthermore, the government “constructed 3,587 units for the occupancy of white families against 320 family units for Negroes” in “the whole Norfolk-Portsmouth-Norfolk county area.” While the Hampton Roads Regional Defense Council did not publish the percentage of defense workers who were African American, Lawrence M. Cox, executive director of the Norfolk Housing Authority noted after seeing the data that “considering the large number of colored people that have come into Norfolk

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during the past 12 months to engage in defense work, God only knows how they have managed to live.”

The Norfolk Housing Authority had hoped that the construction of a second African American defense housing project would allow the city to eliminate a section of slums and help alleviate the city’s acute housing shortage for African Americans. They planned to move African Americans into new housing on vacant property, tear down the slums which they moved from, and then build another housing project where the slums stood. With federal funds, the Norfolk Housing Authority purchased a vacant 15.44-acre property and built a 230 unit low-rent building called Roberts Park, which was named by African American leaders in honor of Norfolk native and the first president of Liberia, Jenkins Roberts. As part of the slum clearance plan, they planned to build a low-income apartment building in the slums called Peake Apartments, which was named after Mary S. Peake who helped educated free African Americans in Hampton Roads before and during the U.S. Civil War. However, acting on orders of the USHA, the Norfolk Housing Authority halted the slum clearance project.

Hunter Hogan, the land negotiator for the Norfolk Housing Authority, notified the African Americans who were selected to move into the Peake Apartments that “the plan to halt construction temporarily is in line with a national policy made necessary because of the war crisis.” He wrote that “due to the acute housing shortage this Authority finds it impractical to demolish any living quarters in the city, and the scarcity of building materials would, in itself, render it very difficult to construct the type of project which has been planned.”

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25 “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University. See also, “Naming Our Slum Clearance Projects,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, August 16, 1941.
USHA earmarked $2 million for slum clearance, the funds were reallocated to defense housing because of the “war crisis.”

Shortly after the U.S. entered World War II, the Norfolk Housing Authority launched a massive survey of 2,000 slum dwellings “running crosswise the whole colored area” to obtain data that would determine “rent scales and tenant selection policies” for African American slum clearance projects. When announcing the survey, executive director Cox highlighted that the WPA had completed the last large-scale survey, which found that “a total of possibly 9,000 substandard dwellings” resided in the city. After evaluating only 199 homes of the 2,000, the Norfolk Housing Authority published their initial findings, revealing that only four dwellings met “standard housing condition requirements, while the other 195 [were] sub-standard.” They found “deplorable local housing conditions” among the African American community, such as 17 families sharing one bath and woodshed homes with “bare dirt” floors. Upon hearing the findings, Cox commented that “the results indicate[d] what we were very fearful about, and that is an overcrowding in the Negro areas.” Despite these findings, the USHA still classified the slum areas as “living quarters.” By 1942, they scrapped every slum clearance project and allocated scarce building materials to the construction of defense housing.

In addition to Oak Leaf Park and Roberts Park, the federal government and the Norfolk Housing Authority completed two other African American defense housing projects, Liberty Park, which consisted of 900 units, and Carney Park, which had 224 units, during the war.

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newspaper article advertising Liberty Park, Lem Graves Jr., a writer for the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, conveyed hope and promise to African Americans in Norfolk. He wrote:

If you are at all human, you may have become so disgusted that you’re just about ready to throw up your defense job and tie yourself back to the little rural town where you didn’t make so much money but where you had a home, a fine family life, and home cooked meals three times a day – urgent shipbuilding needs to the contrary, notwithstanding. THERE’S GOOD NEWS. That’s all understandable but before you do anything rash, lend an ear to these good tidings.36

While the new defense housing “eased the tight housing market a bit,” it only provided relief for a very small group of African American defense workers.37 One *Norfolk Journal and Guide* contributor asserted six months after Graves’s article that the “housing facilities both for civilian use and for war workers in Norfolk and the Hampton Roads area are still grossly inadequate and constitute one of the most pressing problems.”38 He asserted that the blame for the “housing shortage among Negroes” lay with local authorities and charged that “those responsible for this deplorable state of affairs must plead guilty to the charge of hindsight rather than foresight.”39 Not only did “an undersupply of houses” contribute to the “deplorable state of affairs,” but the influx of military members and defense workers during the war caused significant “traffic congestion,” an “acute water shortage,” and resulted in “not enough schools,” all which made “life in Norfolk miserable.”40

The return of veterans further added to Norfolk’s African American housing problem. When the war ended, the Norfolk Housing Authority requested aid from the federal government to erect a 500 unit building adjacent to Roberts Park and Oak Leaf Park for African American

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36 “Lend an Ear, Folks: There’s Hope for Relief of Acute Boom Town Housing Problem,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, October 17, 1942.
37 Lewis, *In Their Interests*, 172.
40 Lewis, *In Their Interests*, 172.
veterans. After approving the request, the federal government “slashed” the number to 309. During construction they cut it again to 281. Then in December of 1946, with “1,000 houseless veterans and families now on the waiting list,” the Federal Public Housing Authority (FPHA) stopped all construction on the site, citing the “rising cost of labor and materials” as the reason. While African American veterans and their families “doubled up in the homes of relatives and friends,” buildings for white veterans were being erected across the city. After “a series of vigorous protests over the suspension,” the FPHA authorized the completion of only 50 units, despite the fact that 140 had already been “in some stage of erection.”

White city leaders, such as Sidney R. Ussher, the director of the Veterans Information Center, voiced their frustration and anger over the FPHA decision. In a protest letter to Raymond M. Foley, a National Social Agency administrator, Ussher highlighted how African Americans had “fought for their country and have given all they had and now they are being deprived of the thing they want most - a home.” Alluding to a nascent Cold War, he asserted that it was “situations as this that turn[ed] people from our democracy to other forms of government.” Additionally, the Norfolk Housing Authority, which changed its name to the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority (NRHA) in 1946, expressed its dissatisfaction with the FPHA’s decision. Charles L. Kaufman, chairman of NRHA, asserted that the “terms of our contract with the FPHA must be complied with fully,” suggesting the federal government complete construction of the original 309 units.

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In their book *Elusive Equality: Desegregation and Resegregation in Norfolk’s Public Schools*, historians Jeffrey Littlejohn and Charles H. Ford described the NRHA as “a model of good-government paternalism.”\(^{48}\) Although they may have possessed a genuine desire to help African Americans, they always maintained power and authority over them. For example, the NRHA appointed three African American men, J. Eugene Diggs, an attorney, the Reverend R. H. Bowling, pastor of First Baptist Church, and P. B. Young, publisher and chairman of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* newspaper, to serve on a “Negro Advisory Committee” to help with “housing construction in Negro slum areas.”\(^{49}\) While the NRHA included these prominent African American leaders in the planning and building processes of African American defense housing, they always maintained final say on housing decisions and tasked them with basic assignments like naming the defense housing projects, such as Roberts Park and Peake Park.

In 1945, Lawrence M. Cox, the executive director for the Norfolk Housing Authority, issued by request of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, a New Year’s statement “concerning the Authority’s experience with the Negro families housed in its developments.”\(^{50}\) In his statement, Cox confessed that the Norfolk Housing Authority did not direct “our program…toward the re-housing of low-income slum dwellers, per se, but toward the housing of families of essential war workers.”\(^{51}\) In an attempt to appease the city’s African Americans, he pointed out that “the vast majority” of African American defense workers, had lived in “sub-standard homes” prior to the war, but that they had provided housing for them.\(^{52}\) In a paternalistic tone, Cox noted that African Americans “have a most receptive attitude toward our efforts to train them to make

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\(^{49}\) “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.


proper use of the facilities and equipment provided in their new quarters.”

Cox inferred that without commensurate training, African Americans would not make “proper use of the facilities” that the city’s white leaders had provided them.

After millions of federal dollars had been invested in defense housing before and during World War II, Norfolk’s African American community wondered why more defense-housing units had not been constructed for them. They questioned, “what has the City of Norfolk done to relieve the acute housing shortage faced by Negroes?” They marveled at how “local financial interests” had a complete “disregard for the housing needs of our people, while at the same time thousands of new homes have been built for white people.” At the war’s conclusion, one Norfolk citizen attested that Norfolk’s African American population had “expanded a full 25 per cent even in the face of an appreciable population shrinkage which naturally followed the curtailment of war activities in the Hampton Roads area,” but that there had been “no comparable increase in housing accommodations for colored occupancy.” The demand for African American housing far exceeded the city’s available supply, further aggravating slum conditions. The “ghetto-like pattern of living for the city’s colored population” had been “not only maintained but solidly entrenched with its consequent evil concomitants of increased crime, disease and death rates.”

In 1949, City Councilman Richard D. Cooke admitted that “there have been many projects for the construction of buildings for the white people, but with the exception of Roberts Park, Oak Leaf Park, Carney Park and Liberty Park, built by the Norfolk Housing

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56 “Housing Issue is Aired Here,” *Journal and Guide*, June 8, 1946.
Authority…there have been no additional accommodations provided for the Negro population since the beginning of World War II.”

He confessed that none of the NRHA’s efforts throughout the past decade “were successful.” While “many Americans for the first time in history had more money than they knew what to do with” after World War II, the majority of Norfolk’s African Americans still lived on “muddy streets” and in “almost uninhabitable shacks.” Ultimately, federal projects in Norfolk during the 1940s reinforced residential segregation, aggravated Norfolk’s African American housing market, and opened the door for Norfolk to receive post-war federal aid.

CHAPTER VII

NORFOLK IN THE 1950S:
“THE BEGINNING OF REDEVELOPMENT IN THE UNITED STATES”

On July 15, 1949, President Harry S. Truman signed into law the Housing Act of 1949 as part of his Fair Deal legislative program. Unlike previous housing acts, the 1949 Act stipulated that “there be a feasible method for the temporary relocation of families displaced from the project area” into “decent, safe, and sanitary dwellings.”¹ Furthermore, it equipped the federal government “with effective means for aiding cities,” such as granting massive loans, “in the vital task of clearing slums and rebuilding blighted areas.”² By the end of the 1940s, Norfolk needed federal assistance to adequately address its slum problem as much as any other city in the country. With “twice as much bad housing as the national urban average,” Norfolk found immediate and substantial relief upon the signing of the 1949 Housing Act.³

In 1940, approximately 144,000 residents lived in 38,753 private dwelling units in Norfolk.⁴ In 1949, about 180,000 residents, “roughly one-third of whom [were] Negro,” lived in 42,778 units.⁵ With a population increase of about 36,000 people, Norfolk erected only 4,025 private homes over the span of 10 years. At the end of the 1940s, Norfolk’s acute housing shortage was so bad that national news outlets began reporting on the city’s slums. One writer for the Saturday Evening Post criticized Norfolk’s “too-easy social conscience” in a 1949 article

¹ Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 227.
² “Chronology of Slum Clearance and Redevelopment Activities In Norfolk 1935-1969,” Papers of Lawrence Morgan Cox, Box 89, Folder 3, Special Collections and University Archives, Patricia W. and J. Douglas Perry Library, Old Dominion University.
³ Charles K. Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, Norfolk, Virginia, for Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority, 1949, 2.
⁵ Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, 14.
and described to a national audience how Norfolk’s slums consisted of “ragged tenements ranged along rutted streets and muddy sidewalks” with “outdoor privies, one to four families or more.”

Even Naval leaders lambasted Norfolk’s housing shortage. In a memorandum titled “General Information on Housing Conditions, Norfolk, Area,” the Navy reported in 1949 that “2,347 men want to bring their families to Norfolk, but cannot find quarters, and that 3,077 are living inadequate quarters.” In response, the Commandant in Norfolk recommended to Commandants in other districts around the nation and world “that they advise personnel ordered to Norfolk not to bring their families.”

As Congress debated the details of the 1949 Housing Act, Norfolk’s leaders sprung into action and decided to launch a massive survey to fully assess the city’s slums with the hope of receiving federal aid. However, instead of requesting the federal government to conduct the survey or commissioning local agents, Norfolk’s leaders decided to hire surveying professionals. On December 21, 1948, Norfolk’s City Council voted to provide $25,000 for NRHA “to make studies and plans for housing and redevelopment projects,” which the NRHA used to hire architect and planning consultant Charles K. Agle from Princeton University and the New York consulting firm of Harrison, Ballard & Allen. Unlike surveys conducted in the past that examined sections of Norfolk, Agle and his team surveyed every corner of Norfolk. With a massive team, including 128 volunteer workers of the Women’s Committee for Interracial Cooperation who conducted “thousands of house-to-house interviews to establish the characteristics of slum families,” Agle received “detailed information on employment and

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7 Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, 20.
8 Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, 20.
9 “Chronology of Slum Clearance,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 3, Old Dominion University.
income” from hundreds of merchants, manufacturers, and the Navy.\textsuperscript{10} Agle’s survey was so massive that he asserted “the future of Norfolk for the rest of its history [would] be fixed by the action of the next ten years,” if Norfolk chose to follow his recommendations.\textsuperscript{11}

A few months after President Truman signed the 1949 Housing Act, the team of professionals published a 130-page report that outlined the state of Norfolk housing through an “assembly of detailed facts” and provided proposals that they purported would result in the “physical and economic improvement of the City of Norfolk.”\textsuperscript{12} They analyzed not only slum clearance, but also the process required to erect multiple public housing buildings in accordance with the new law.

In the report, Agle and his team published several maps, including a map that depicted where African Americans lived throughout the city. The surveyors depicted the neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of African Americans in a dark shade, which clearly illustrated the boundaries of African American neighborhoods.

\textsuperscript{10} Agle, \textit{Redevelopment and Housing Program}, ii.
\textsuperscript{11} Agle, \textit{Redevelopment and Housing Program}, i.
\textsuperscript{12} Agle, \textit{Redevelopment and Housing Program}, i.
Figure (2) “Negro Residential Areas and Schools”
Charles K. Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, Norfolk, Virginia, for Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority, 1949.
Agle and his team noted that the section of the city where most African Americans lived was the “area bounded by Granby Street, Elmwood and Cedar Grove cemeteries on the west, the Eastern Branch of the Elizabeth River on the south, and by the tracks of the Norfolk & Western Railway on the east and north.”\(^\text{13}\) In an effort to explain why this section of town housed the majority of the African American community, Agle and his team concluded:

> The reason for the great density within these boundaries as compared with that found elsewhere is the result of four factors: a) The buildings which house the Negro population were originally built at a high ground coverage; b) for a long time, the railroad tracks formed a sort of “Chinese Wall” across which residential expansion was slow; c) until recently, few Negros were financially able to buy or build their own homes, and therefore kept increasing the load borne by existing structures; d) during the war the substantial increase of Negro population in the city was not accompanied by a corresponding increase in the area occupied by Negro housing.\(^\text{14}\)

While the surveyors uncovered several factors that contributed to the congestion in Norfolk’s African American neighborhoods, they failed to note that violence and threats from white residents prevented African Americans from moving outside of the segregated areas. However, they did note that the “area formerly occupied entirely by white population,” referring to the white section of Brambleton, contained “at least one Negro family in almost every block.”\(^\text{15}\) After World War II, African Americans had successfully breached the Corprew Avenue “line of demarcation” and vanquished the restrictive covenant that caged them in for decades.\(^\text{16}\) Although the line had finally been crossed, a massive “exodus of the remaining white population” to the suburbs occurred.\(^\text{17}\) Furthermore, the homes throughout Brambleton had

\(^{13}\) Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, 33.  
\(^{14}\) Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, 33.  
\(^{15}\) Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, 34.  
\(^{16}\) “Another Crisis,” Journal and Guide, March 21, 1925.  
\(^{17}\) Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, 34.
deteriorated to the point that they were “by no means attractive except by comparison with the houses in the worst slum areas.”

Agle’s maps revealed that the area with the highest concentration of African Americans had the lowest value per dwelling, the most dwelling units per acre of land, and the most arrests over the course of a two-month period. On the “Standards of Dwelling” map, all African American neighborhoods were valued between “0 and 604 dollars.” The areas with the lightest shade were valued at “3775 dollars and over.” As a testament to Norfolk’s strict enforcement of residential segregation, the most expensive homes in the city sat just a couple blocks away from the poorest African American slum dwellings. When compared to the HOLC’s 1940 Residential Security Map of Norfolk, every neighborhood rated as “Fourth grade” received the darkest shading on Agle’s 1949 maps.

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18 Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, 34.
20 Agle, “Standards of Dwelling,” Redevelopment and Housing Program.
Figure (3) “Standards of Dwellings By Relative Assessed Valuation, 1949”
Charles K. Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, Norfolk, Virginia, for Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority, 1949.
Figure (4) “Density of Dwellings”
Figure (5) “Arrests - May and June, 1949”
Charles K. Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, Norfolk, Virginia, for Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority, 1949.
In the report, Agle and his team noted that the preamble to the 1949 Housing Act stated that “local public bodies shall be assisted in their effort leading toward the development of ‘well-planned, integrated, residential neighborhoods.’” Since the law never defined “integrated” neighborhood, however, Agle and his team drafted their own criteria for what they believed it entailed. They decided on the following:

1. A neighborhood may be bounded, but not traversed, by major traffic arteries.  
2. A neighborhood should contain its own school, and no elementary school children residing in it should have to cross any major traffic arteries on their way to and from school.  
3. A neighborhood should have its own community center building, and adequate playground facilities.  
4. A neighborhood should have easy access to minimum amount of shopping facilities for daily household supply and service.

According to the surveying professionals, “integrated” did not include the mixing of races, but rather whether a neighborhood had things like community centers and “easy access” to shopping malls.

Agle and his team made several recommendations for Norfolk’s city leaders in their report. They recommended Norfolk’s leaders pursue “Federal aid for redevelopment and low-rent housing” and construct 3000 public housing units. They argued that “the state of structural dilapidation and mechanical deficiency in the predominantly Negro slum area, the income status of the population, and the fact that improvement and maintenance have historically been nonexistent” left the city leaders with no choice but to pursue public housing. Since race did not factor into Agle’s understanding of “integrated,” Agle and his team recommended that the

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21 Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, 81.  
22 Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, 81.  
23 Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, 2.  
24 Agle, Redevelopment and Housing Program, 53.
city construct the public housing units for African Americans in African American neighborhoods.

When Agle published his report in 1949, it received a “mixed reaction” from Norfolk’s citizens. Civic leaders “were delighted” since it called for remedial steps designed to wipe out slums that stood in the way of any future expansion of the Central Business District. Norfolk’s downtown merchants “were pleased” because it called for the elimination of “slums eating into the heart of downtown.” Even some of Norfolk’s African American leaders supported the slum clearance proposals. J. Eugene Diggs, an attorney and member of the “Negro Advisory Committee,” asserted before Norfolk’s City Council that the city would not be “saving dollars,” but would be “saving human souls” with the slum clearance projects. He challenged “those who object to this program” to “walk through the slum areas, and then come back and say they should remain.” However, those who lived in the slums questioned the slum removal projects. Attorney James G. Martin stated before the City Council that he represented 60 property owners who were “highly resentful that their homes are being taken.” In response, NRHA chairman Charles Kaufman explained that “there will be some hardship to be endured, of course, but from the overall view it is for the best.”

One month after President Truman signed the 1949 Housing Act, Norfolk and Galveston, Texas, “shared the distinction of being the first cities in the nation to be assigned an allocation of housing units under the new public housing program.” The federal government approved the construction of 3,000 units for Norfolk and 500 units for Galveston. Shortly after the

25 “Chronology of Slum Clearance,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 3, Old Dominion University.
26 “Chronology of Slum Clearance,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 3, Old Dominion University.
27 “Chronology of Slum Clearance,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 3, Old Dominion University.
30 “Slum Housing Project Over Major Hurdle,” Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, August 11, 1951.
31 “Slum Housing Project Over Major Hurdle,” Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, August 11, 1951.
32 “Chronology of Slum Clearance,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 3, Old Dominion University.
announcement, the *U.S. Daily News*, an official publication of the U.S. conference of mayors, praised the “foresightedness of City Council in making $25,000 available for a study of local housing conditions” that enabled Norfolk “to be first in line with its application for 3,000 units.”\(^{33}\) Additionally, the *Architectural Forum*, a magazine that reported on architecture and homebuilding in the U.S., praised Norfolk’s slum clearance plan and called it the “first large-scale demonstration of the 1949 Act.”\(^{34}\) By investing in Agle’s survey, Norfolk had garnered positive attention from the national media and from leaders across the country.

On December 11, 1951, a date considered by NRHA “as the beginning of redevelopment in the United States,” Norfolk commenced its first slum removal project, known as Project One, in front of 2,000 onlookers and “representatives of the national news media.”\(^{35}\) In *Pride and Prejudice: School Desegregation and Urban Renewal in Norfolk, 1950-1959*, author Forrest R. White noted that the NRHA’s first slum clearance project was “a prime example of black removal at its best: a horribly blighted section of housing, with its massive attendant problems of crime, infestation, juvenile delinquency, disease, and public health menace, was removed and then replaced with modern public housing.”\(^{36}\) While Project One had been “carefully conceived, thoroughly planned, and meticulously implemented,” Norfolk’s subsequent redevelopment projects, which started after 1956, were “rushed, haphazard, and poorly planned.”\(^{37}\) Furthermore, they were “used to create segregated neighborhoods, strictly enforce well-defined color barriers, isolate black populations, relocate integrated schools, and otherwise frustrate efforts to desegregate the public school system.”\(^{38}\)

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\(^{33}\) Quoted in “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.

\(^{34}\) “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University.


\(^{36}\) White, *Pride and Prejudice*, 290.


\(^{38}\) White, *Pride and Prejudice*, 291.
Three years after Project One started, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision, declaring it unconstitutional for states to separate African American and whites in public schools. Shortly after the ruling, the NRHA hastily kicked off “four nearly simultaneous endeavors – the Atlantic City, Old Dominion, Broad Creek, and Downtown Projects.”

The four projects combined “encompassed an area ten times the size of NRHA Project One which itself was twice the size of any development that New York or any other city had attempted.” During Project One, the NRHA cleared “127 acres of downtown slums, about one-fifth of the city’s slum area” whereas during the four latter projects, the NRHA torn down the homes of “almost twenty-thousand people—roughly ten percent of its population” and bulldozed collectively 800 acres of land.

Norfolk’s leaders initially responded to the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling with relative “calm.” Norfolk School Superintendent J. J. Brewbaker asserted that “there would be few Negroes in white schools because of existing residential segregation.” Likewise, city councilmen Ezra Summers and Roy Martin emphasized that “Norfolk will probably be less effected than any city in the state because of the geographical set up here [that includes] well-defined residential districts.” However, as the “heavy storm clouds of racial disunity” started to build over Norfolk, city’s leaders grew anxious over ideas of integration and decided to utilize federal funding to not only eliminate the city’s slums, but also to maintain residential and school segregation.

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41 “Chronology of NRHA 1935-1969,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 1, Old Dominion University. See also, White, *Pride and Prejudice*, 106.
42 White, *Pride and Prejudice*, 57.
44 White, *Pride and Prejudice*, 57.
Norfolk’s Mayor, William Fred Duckworth, tasked the NRHA with “demolish[ing] relatively integrated frontiers such as Broad Creek Village and Atlantic City” and creating new “buffer zones” between African American and white neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{46} Broad Creek Village, which consisted of 2,600 dwellings, and Atlantic City, which had close to 1,000 dwellings, were both mixed-race Norfolk neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{47} Moreover, they were vibrant communities. One writer for the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot* commented in an article in 1957 that Atlantic City had “a Greenwich Village flavor” and a “Bohemian and cosmopolitan character.”\textsuperscript{48} Despite the hip vibe of the neighborhood, which consisted of homes built before, during, and after WWII, the NRHA bulldozed the entire area, displaced the community, and built an industrial park in its place without erecting a single public housing building. Through the construction of the “Old Dominion Project,” the NRHA created “a convenient buffer zone between the working-class community of Lamberts Point and the wealthier (white) subdivisions nearby.”\textsuperscript{49} Ultimately, the NRHA “used the placement of Old Dominion University, interstate highways, recreation areas, and industrial parks to act as a natural barrier between racially diverse neighborhoods and to maintain separate race school districts.”\textsuperscript{50}

By the end of the 1950s, the NRHA successfully maintained segregated neighborhoods and schools in Norfolk through urban renewal projects. While Project One created 3,000 units for African Americans, the project did nothing to disrupt residential segregation. After the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, the NRHA, by direction of the Mayor, tore down mixed race areas and created new buffer zones, such as Old Dominion University. By the end of the 1950s, Norfolk had leveled thousands of acres, demolished hundreds of homes,

\textsuperscript{46} Littlejohn and Ford, *Elusive Equality*, 41. See also, White, *Pride and Prejudice*, 123.
\textsuperscript{47} White, *Pride and Prejudice*, 107.
\textsuperscript{49} White, *Pride and Prejudice*, 123.
\textsuperscript{50} White, *Pride and Prejudice*, 267.
and displaced large numbers of African Americans. Concurrently, the city had built new highways, erected new medical and health facilities, built new industrial parks, and opened new spaces for businesses. In recognition of Norfolk’s massive urban renewal projects, _Look Magazine_ and the National Municipal League crowned Norfolk the All-America City Award on March 3rd, 1960 while African American demonstrators quietly protested outside in the cold.
CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION: A STARTING POINT

Between the years 1914, when Norfolk passed its first segregation ordinance, and 1959, when the city received the All-America City Award, Norfolk effectively maintained and perpetuated residential segregation through a variety of methods. Notably, throughout the 45-year period, the federal government opened several spaces and created numerous opportunities for Norfolk’s leaders to act on their prejudices. Norfolk’s leaders used the federal government’s assistance to map, analyze, and eventually remove the city’s African American slums. Furthermore, the federal government helped facilitate residential segregation in Norfolk through public housing. In writing about the effects of the 1949 Housing Act, Historian Kenneth G. Jackson noted that “because municipalities had discretion on where and when to build public housing, the projects invariably reinforced racial segregation.”¹ Such was the case in Norfolk.

Jackson also wrote that “housing authorities were typically made up of prominent citizens who were more anxious to clear slums…than they were to rehouse the poor.”² Norfolk’s leaders, primarily those in the Norfolk Housing Authority and later the NRHA, demonstrated a desire to alleviate the plight of Norfolk’s African Americans. However, they did so in a paternalistic and utilitarian manner. Norfolk’s leaders confronted many turning points in dealing with race relations between 1914 and 1959, but they consistently supported segregation and discriminatory practices. As they modernized Norfolk and eliminated the slums, they struggled to recognize the human toll caused by the city’s growth and development.

¹ Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 225.
² Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 225.
In 1969, President Richard M. Nixon nominated Lawrence M. Cox for the position of Assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).\(^3\) Having served as NRHA’s executive director for many years and considered one of the “architects” of the 1949 U.S. Housing Act, Cox was suitably qualified for the position. However, opposition to his appointment “extended from Norfolk to Washington.”\(^4\) Ellis W. James, Norfolk resident and president of the Tidewater Fair Housing group, opposed Cox’s nomination and brought to light the human cost of Norfolk’s redevelopment projects. As head of the Tidewater Fair Housing group, an organization that pursued legal action against those who denied African Americans fair housing opportunities, and someone who “spoke out in defense of African Americans who participated in the city’s sit-in demonstrations and voter registration drives,” James fittingly represented Norfolk’s African American community.\(^5\) In an address before Congress during Cox’s confirmation hearing, James listed the primary reasons for opposing Cox’s nomination:

The compounding of the ghetto’s serious problems, the sense of betrayal and harassment of many citizens who had been led to believe that conservation efforts would be made in certain areas such as Ghent and worst of all, the depriving of many citizens of the right to home ownership, privacy and dignity after a lifetime of struggle to achieve those goals.\(^6\)

He asserted that “public housing in Norfolk…perpetuated segregation in education as well as in housing” and that the NRHA had “displaced low income families from areas in Norfolk and then allowed the creation of much higher cost housing to be placed in these areas.”\(^7\) James concluded by stating that “I respectfully submit that Mr. Cox should not be confirmed for this appointment and that serious consideration be given to alerting Secretary Romney to the situation that exists in Norfolk so that HUD might undertake complete investigation of this

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\(^3\) “Chronology of Slum Clearance,” Papers of Cox, Box 89, Folder 3, Old Dominion University.


Despite James’s testimony, Congress approved Cox’s nomination and Cox was sworn in on March 11, 1969.

Historian Forrest White, who also “spoke out in defense” of those participating in sit-ins and voter registration drives, believed that Norfolk’s leaders had “a bold vision, and it was shared by men and women all across the country, but the difference in Norfolk was that they were just the sort of individuals who could make that aspiration a reality.” In 1967, Robert C. Weaver, the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Secretary, praised that “bold vision” and highlighted that Norfolk’s leaders pursued “the national housing policy” of slum removal “in an active and aggressive fashion over the past two decades.” He stated “the city [is] where the story of rebuilding America’s cities for the 20th and 21st Centuries began.” He declared that “since the first shack was demolished in 1951, Norfolk’s redevelopment and renewing process has converted and continues to convert what once were community liabilities into community assets.” Liabilities, such as African American slums, had been turned into “assets,” such as segregated public housing buildings and industrial parks where vibrant and integrated communities once resided, both of which remain in Norfolk today.

In 2013, the National Civic League named Norfolk an “All-America” City. One of three initiatives that earned Norfolk the award was a program called “Neighbors Building Neighborhoods (NBN)” that seeks to “identify and mobilize the positive attributes of the neighborhood and promote it as a great place in which to live, work, and invest.” While the program highlights unique neighborhood qualities, it fails to bridge neighborhoods together,

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10 “Lawrence Cox ‘City 1966-67’,” Papers of Lawrence Morgan Cox, Box 7, Folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, Patricia W. and J. Douglas Perry Library, Old Dominion University.
11 “Lawrence Cox ‘City 1966-67’,” Papers of Cox, Box 7, Folder 2, Old Dominion University.
12 “Lawrence Cox ‘city 1966-67’,” Papers of Cox, Box 7, Folder 2, Old Dominion University.
especially those of different races. In the opening to *Crabgrass Frontier*, Jackson wrote that “the space around us – the physical organization of neighborhoods, roads, yards, houses, and apartments - sets up living patterns that condition our behavior.”

The patchwork of racially homogenous neighborhoods in Norfolk conditions the behavior of its residents today. It reinforces prejudices, makes “it easier for whites to maintain racial stereotypes about black values and culture,” and makes “it easier to deny or ignore their suffering.”

In order to prevent the perpetuation of residential segregation, Norfolk’s leaders and citizens must, as a starting point, take part in conversation about the long and complex history of race relations in Norfolk. Only then might the divisions in Norfolk be truly crossed.

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14 Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 3.
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VITA

Kevin Lang Ringelstein

EDUCATION

M.A., Old Dominion University, December 2015
History
Address: History Department, 8000 Batten Arts & Letters, Norfolk, VA 23529
Concentration: Twentieth-Century American Social History.
GPA: 4.0

B.S., United States Naval Academy, May 2007
History, With Distinction
GPA: 3.7 Cumulative, 3.93 Major
Class Rank: 76 of 1,046

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

U.S. Naval Aviator
May 2007-Dec 2015
MH-60S Helicopter Instructor Pilot
Combat Deployment in Persian Gulf and Horn of Africa
Hurricane Sandy Relief Operations in New York City